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Observations of the attachés in the Soviet Union in the fall of '62.

THE FACE OF MOSCOW IN THE MISSILE CRISIS

William F. Scott

Soviet brinkmanship in the Cuban crisis of October 1962 focused the attention of Kremlinologists on a relatively new concept in the lexicon of international conflict, "crisis management." This term encompasses both the chess-like moves one opponent makes externally against the other and the internal measures he takes to control the crisis at home. It is on the latter that this article will chiefly bear.

A complete understanding of how an opponent has gone about the management of past crises is of course virtually out of the question. Censorship and security measures, along with misinterpretations and miscalculations on his part or his opponents, are but a few of the obstacles. But an insight into the enemy's habitual modus operandi in a crisis would be of such great importance in reading his intentions another time that even a modest contribution to such an understanding should be worth while.

The Weeks Before

What went on in the inner councils of the Soviet Union during the Cuban confrontation may never be known, but certain aspects, chiefly internal, of its management measures were witnessed by the military attachés of the American embassy in Moscow. What follows is their worm's-eye view of the Moscow scene during that tense period, their observations reassembled and reviewed with benefit of hindsight. A worm's-eye view is the best available to foreigners in the USSR; they are permitted in less than one percent of the total Soviet land area.[1] This was true in 1962, and the restrictions have

[1] Edward Crankshaw, "Big Brother Still Watches," *New York Times*, December 29, 1963. Both the U.S. and Canadian air attachés sent this article home as the best and most expressive description available of Soviet restrictions on foreigners. Crankshaw writes that ". . . the tourist's image is the image of the display put on for his especial benefit in certain selected places: half a dozen great cities, half a dozen collective farms, half a dozen villages, and one or two resorts. And if it is objected, as it so often is, that it is impossible to turn a whole city—Moscow, Leningrad, Tashkent, Alma Ata, Tiflis—into a shopwindow, a display cabinet, the answer is that you don't know the Russians. Because this is precisely what the Soviet Government *can* do and does."

not been relaxed since then, the nuclear test ban treaty, grain shipments, and the advent of Brezhnev and Kosygin notwithstanding.

A number of events which at the time seemed to have no semblance of a connection with Cuba occupied the attention of the Moscow attachés during October. Early in the month an assistant U.S. naval attaché was declared persona non grata. A second member of the embassy staff received the same news on October 12. Then on the 20th all attachés were speculating on the significance of China's attack on India, which Soviet media did not mention until three days after the event.

The flow of news about Cuba traced a peculiar pattern in the weeks before the crisis broke. At the end of August Che Guevara had arrived in Moscow, and on September 2 his request for armaments and technical specialists to train Cuban servicemen was reported. After that Cuban coverage came in a continual stream, reaching its high on September 11 when TASS fulminated about the "provocations of the United States which might plunge the world into universal thermonuclear war." From this point on the attention given by Soviet news sources to Cuba declined, though there were occasional articles such as that in *Izvestia* on September 28 describing American reaction to the Soviet-Cuban agreement for the construction of a fishing port. From the 1st through the 23rd of October, Yemen received far more publicity than Cuba.

The Crisis Breaks

The first information about Soviet missiles in Cuba came to the attachés in the newscasts of the Voice of America and the BBC. When these were in Russian they were totally jammed, but the jamming of the English was less severe and a part of it could be understood. The overseas editions of the *New York Herald Tribune* and the *New York Times,* generally arriving at the embassy several days late, provided avidly devoured background information.

Soviet news sources did not report the blockade which President Kennedy had announced on October 22 until some forty-eight hours later. Then *Pravda* carried on the first page a Soviet version of the President's speech distorted in such fashion that the Russian people would not know about the Soviet troops and ballistic missiles in Cuba. This kind of news management made it difficult for the Western diplomatic corps to appraise the degree of importance the Soviet leaders actually attached to the situation.

The only Soviet reaction immediately manifest was to order all diplomatic travellers, including dependents, to return to Moscow. (An exception was made for the State Department officer accompanying the Robert Shaw chorale on its tour of the Soviet Union.) Two USAF air attachés on the first leg of a Leningrad-Tashkent-Moscow trip were contacted by an Intourist representative and told the Soviet government could not guarantee their safety outside of Moscow in view of the U.S. action over Cuba. To test this travel ban, both U.S. and other NATO personnel filed, under the normal official procedure, letters of intent to travel outside Moscow. These must be filed in advance of departure, giving the complete itinerary and dates; then if there is no reply it is understood that the travel can be undertaken. In all cases during the Cuban crisis notice came that "the trip cannot be registered for reasons of a temporary nature"—the standard phraseology forbidding travel to the vast bulk of the so-called "open" areas of the Soviet Union.

At the same time the U.S. attachés put into operation a joint plan for comprehensive, around-the-clock intelligence observation in Moscow and environs, looking for anything out of the ordinary that might illuminate Soviet intentions and reactions to the situation. They were particularly alert, of course, for any indications that the Soviets were preparing Moscow for a thermonuclear exchange. Were government offices being evacuated? Were civil defense measures being taken? Were the normal number of trucks to be seen on the streets, both day and night, or was there an unexplained increase or decrease? How many people were in lines buying food at Moscow markets? What was the attitude of the people toward Americans in restaurants, theaters, and the subways; had this changed?

Among the places under scrutiny outside the city but within the forty-kilometer radius permitted were two civilian airfields, Vnukovo and Shermetyevo, the latter serving both domestic and international flights. All key installations such as these were checked at least once each day. The rounds were made primarily by automobile, although some districts were covered on foot and by subway—that deep and extensive system which, with its heavy blast doors, may constitute the world's largest and best civil defense shelter. As is customary in Moscow for U.S. personnel, no one travelled alone, two-man teams being the general rule. The Soviet surveillance was normal—that is close and constant. Seasoned attachés accompanied new arrivals, and Department of State personnel assisted whenever their normal duties permitted. The attachés of the three services completely

pooled their efforts, sending to Washington daily a single joint report. Responsibility for its preparation was rotated among the three, and it was coordinated with the Deputy Chief of Mission or his representative before being dispatched.

Business as Usual

On the surface, life in Moscow proceeded at a normal pace. After October 24 the Soviet television, radio, and press spoke daily of the "high-handed American aggressors" and the "criminal intentions of the enemies of peace," but there was still no mention that Soviet troops or ballistic missiles were in Cuba. Further, no significant changes could be detected in the life of the city, nor any changes in the Russian people's attitude toward Americans. Waitresses in hotels and restaurants, clerks in stores, and taxi drivers gave no sign that the famed Russian grapevine was working to inform the people of the critical turn of events.

During the week of October 22 the Red Army held its usual night rehearsal for the annual November 7 parade in commemoration of the Bolshevik revolution. To a newcomer the tanks, missiles, and other weapons rolled out would have presented an ominous sight; but the experienced attachés noted that rehearsal procedures were normal and the weapons almost identical with those deployed during the last previous parade.

Perhaps the most talked-about event in Moscow during the week of the crisis was the opening of the New York City Ballet. Khrushchev had let his dislike of abstract and modernistic art be known; and here Balanchine, the world's leading exponent of the modern school of theater, was opening with an unfamiliar concept of ballet in the city where that art form had its strongest tradition. The ballet was a success. Night after night the troupe played before a full and enthusiastic house. Soviet critics, initially rather reserved until they found that the regime was not offering serious objections, gave favorable reviews. Many high-ranking Party members and Moscow's leading intellectuals attended. And at no time did they, or anyone else in the audience, suggest by their behavior an awareness of the world crisis centered off the southeast corner of the United States.

There was even a second cultural import from the United States in Moscow during that week. On October 23, while the New York City Ballet was performing at the Kremlin Palace of Congresses, an American opera singer, Jerome Hines, was featured at the Bolshoi.

The central box was occupied by Comrades Khrushchev, Brezhnev, Kozlov, Kosygin, Mikoyan, Polanskiy, and Grishin. Khrushchev led the audience in the applause.

For the night of October 26 the U.S. air attaché had invited four Soviet Air Force officers and their wives to be his guests at the New York City Ballet and a buffet served afterwards in a hotel (this in return for a hail-and-farewell luncheon the Soviet Air Force had given for the new attaché and his predecessor). When the invitations had been extended, about October 16, a Soviet liaison officer had hinted that at least some of the guests would accept. With the news of October 22 it became unlikely that any would come; diplomatically, however, it was necessary to proceed with all preparations. The Soviets apparently were waiting for the invitations to be withdrawn, but the embassy protocol officer concurred that this should not be done. Finally, about noon on the 26th, the day of the party, the Soviet liaison officer called; he regretted that all the guests had been called out of town and so could not accept.

Maneuvers

There were, however, instances of manipulating both news and people for purposes of crisis management. On October 25 Soviet news media gave unexpected publicity to a telegram that Aleksey, the Patriarch of Moscow and all Russia, had sent to U Thant, Secretary General of the United Nations. It warned that mankind was threatened by the outbreak of a world war as a result of actions taken by the U.S. administration against the Republic of Cuba. The United States was violating Christian teachings. To the attachés it seemed that Aleksey's telegram was more for Russian internal consumption than for U Thant. Stalin had used the Russian church in World War II to get popular support for his government; Khrushchev might be starting to woo the nation in case of similar need.

A second device, one familiar to Americans in recent years, were the "demonstrations." On October 24, the day the Soviets reported the U.S. blockade of Cuba without mentioning their own troops, missiles, and aircraft there, a half-hearted attempt at a student demonstration was made. Fifteen or twenty students threw a few ink bottles at the embassy, then moved on to Spaso House, the ambassador's residence some seven blocks away, and threw a few more. Then they disbanded. There hadn't been enough of them even to interfere seriously with traffic in front of the embassy.

The big official "demonstration," a highly organized affair, came on October 27. The Soviets took every possible precaution that it not get out of hand. Hundreds of troops were moved into side streets within a few blocks of the embassy to ensure complete control of the crowd at all times; these were in place before the demonstration started. The gathering of the crowd afterward in front of the embassy was no more spontaneous than the movement of the troops had been. Truckloads of children were unloaded a short distance away, lined up ready to demonstrate, and handed signs denouncing imperialism, colonialism, and so on.

The youthful protesters had no notion that the Soviet leaders were squirming under a virtual ultimatum to remove their strategic weapons from Cuba; they had been told only that the imperialistic capitalists of the United States were planning to invade the homeland of the peace-loving Cubans. What they did know was that they were getting out of a few hours of school and work. There were not more than a few thousand of them, and their performance was unenthusiastic. After about two hours, apparently an order to disperse was given, and the demonstrators appeared happy to oblige. As the last stragglers departed, the security troops also moved out from the side streets where they had been keeping watch.

The Crisis Passes

The first hint about Soviet missiles in Cuba was given to the Russians at 1900 hours, October 27, a few hours after the demonstration, when the Moscow radio argued that ". . . if the United States believes it has the right to demand removal from Cuba of missiles described by Washington as offensive, then it will be natural to recognize the USSR's right to demand the withdrawal of American destructive rocket weapons from Turkey, a country that is our next-door neighbor."

On Monday, October 29, representatives of the entire Moscow attaché corps attended a reception at the Turkish embassy. The Soviet Armed Forces sent token representation. By then the general feeling among the attachés was that the crisis had at least receded. The Turkish attachés were worried lest a secret deal had been made and recently installed U.S. missiles would be removed from their country.

That the crisis was fully ended became apparent on November 1, during a reception at the Japanese embassy. An unusual number of

senior Soviet Air Force officers was present, and their attitude toward the U.S. air attachés was more nearly appropriate to the days some seventeen years earlier when the Russian and American allies met on the Elbe than to the aftermath of a desperate hostile confrontation. Almost completely ignoring their Japanese hosts, the Soviet officers insisted on toasting and drinking with the U.S. airmen. Clearly impelled by relief from tension, they offered toasts to peace, to friendship, and even to "the possible marriage of my grandson with your granddaughter." When a secret police officer attempted to break up the toasts between the Soviet Air Force chief of staff and the U.S. air attaché, the chief of staff told him to "get the hell away." And this unprecedented behavior was no isolated accident: on November 5, during a reception celebrating the Italian national day, Soviet Air Force officers showed a similar great cordiality to the U.S. attachés.

Net Observations

The attachés had seen nothing in Moscow during the entire period of the Cuban crisis to reflect the serious external tension. The only observable Soviet reaction was the ban on all travel in the Soviet Union, and this was not put into effect until after President Kennedy had announced the blockade. Two attachés who flew to Vienna by way of Kiev on October 26 were treated with exceptional courtesy on the aircraft and by customs officials in Kiev.

Even with the benefit of hindsight, it is still difficult to point to any unusual Soviet behavior during the month of October. The persona non grata actions against an assistant naval attaché on October 5 and a Foreign Service officer on October 12 were probably, as thought at the time, in retaliation for the expulsion of two Soviets charged with espionage in the United States. The timing of the Chinese attack on India may have been entirely coincidence; it embarrassed the Soviets who were training some Indian pilots in the USSR.

Although the public did not know it until months later, the Soviets' confidence in their own internal security was also shaken in October. On the 22nd, the day the United States announced the blockade, Penkovsky was arrested, implicating the top leadership of the secret police as well as military intelligence. In December the Soviets, believing a U.S. attaché to have been involved, updated an old film, entitled "Along the Black Path" and designed to alert the Soviet public

against the U.S. attachés, and showed it on television and in fourteen Moscow movie theaters simultaneously.

From the viewpoint of crisis management and intelligence, this suppression of any outward sign during the Cuban crisis reemphasizes the Soviet ability to control news and deceive the people by that subtlest of propaganda devices, the half truth. And as well as could be observed during that week, the Soviet public responded exactly as their leaders desired. One only hopes that this control would not be successful in suppressing all indications of preparation for hostilities if there really were such preparations.

Did the Soviets never intend to do anything but withdraw from Cuba if it came to a showdown? Were the Kremlin leaders prepared for miscalculation and explosion of the crisis into open conflict? To what degree was the Soviet military machine alerted to this possibility? From the worm's-eye view in Moscow, such questions could not be answered. But complete domination of the internal environment assured the Soviet leadership a high degree of flexibility in utilizing psychology and propaganda. In this respect crisis management as practiced by the Soviet Union has the advantage over its counterpart in democratic countries.